Interview with Thomas P. Chapman, Jr. (1903-1984)
former Clerk of the Fairfax County Circuit Court
Conducted by D'Anne Evans on January 19, 1976

[Start of transcription]

Evans: Thomas Chapman on January 19, 1976. If you want to just say something for the sound level?

Chapman: Well, I suppose the only thing I can say is we're going to begin the interview or the discussion–

Evans: Any moment.

Chapman: Any moment.

[Recording paused]

Evans: Mr. Chapman, as I recall it, you weren't born in Fairfax County, but you came pretty close to being born here. Could you tell us when you came here and why your family came to Fairfax County?

Chapman: Well, I was born in Riverdale, Maryland, November 21st, 1903. And I don't know why they came here so soon afterwards, but my father worked for the federal government and I think transportation was a little better on this side of the river, probably than from the Maryland side. See we had an interurban trolley line out as far as Vienna at the time so we first bought a home in Vienna, right in the city, or Town of Vienna, pardon me. And we stayed there, I guess for two or three years. And then we moved up on a little farm between Vienna and Oakton and that's where I grew up. And we left there in 1922 and moved into the Town of Fairfax. And most of the time from then on, I've been here in the town and now the City of Fairfax. Of course, the town was very small when we came here and there weren't any streetlights or anything like that it was just a crude country town.

Evans: Where were the main collection of houses at that point? Did you move down here to the corner of Center and–

Chapman: The corner of Center Street and Chain Bridge Road. And, well the main center was on Route 123 and then on Main Street going the other direction so that most of them were right in that area. See, we had no subdivisions whatsoever, as I recall.

Evans: And what was the transportation situation?

Chapman: Well, the transportation system beginning about 1912 I think, they extended the inter urban line from Vienna to Fairfax and the final terminal was right in front of the National Bank of Fairfax, that is between there and the north wing of the courthouse building complex. And we had wonderful service at that time, hourly service from about five o'clock in the morning until around, I would say one o'clock in the morning.

Evans: (Laughter) Oh no.

Chapman: Yeah. Mhmm. And it was just an hour from here for instance, to 12th and Pennsylvania Avenue. So, I went to high school in Washington. Of course, my father used the trolley line. It's interesting to note many people don't realize it, but in those days, instead of building homes on the main highways, people built them on the trolley line and that accounts for Clifton, for instance, and Burke Station, Merrifield, Dunn Loring, all of those places. The old houses were on the trolley line and it wasn't until the more modern times that they started– when automobiles became into use that they started building on the highways.

Evans: Would trolleys stop anywhere along the line?

Chapman: They had the station jegs(?) and the stations weren't very far apart. So you didn't have to go very far to get on the car.

Evans: Do you remember how much you paid to go to Washington?

Chapman: I don't remember but compared to the bus fares today, it was practically nothing. We of course, those of us who traveled every day, bought a monthly ticket, and that allowed you to ride at least every day during the month. And I don't remember the amount of it, but it was very cheap. Of course, everything else was too, so I guess it was all relative.

Evans: And did you go to grade school out here?

Chapman: Yes, indeed. I started in a one room school, Hatmark School. It's just a short distance from the Howard Johnson's circle down here on 237, the old Lee Highway. See from the farm, I could cut back through the woods. We had no bus transportation, didn't need any as a matter of fact. And so I went there I think for three years, then they built a new school at Oakton. A very modern frame school. So, I went up there for two years and then Vienna built a better school. So, I went to Vienna. You see, I was right between the two and I had to walk either way, so it didn't matter whether I went to Oakton or whether I went to Vienna. So, I finished grade school in Vienna. Then I went to Western High School in Washington and then William and Mary.

Evans: And when you got out of William and Mary, you came back here?

Chapman: I came back here and became principal of the school here in Fairfax. At that time, it was an elementary school with one year of high school and I stayed there two years. And then I went into the Office of the Commissioner of the Revenue.

Evans: Now before you get on that, how did a twenty-two-year-old get to be principal of the school?

Chapman: Well, I'll tell you there was opposition. I mean, from the superintendent. The superintendent at that time was an elderly man. I guess he was in his upper seventies, maybe as much as eighty. And he didn't think much of young people coming in and especially as principals, but it happened a good friend of mine, F. S. McCandlish here in Fairfax was a member of the school board and he was the one who encouraged me to go to college. And when I came back, why he said he was determined that I come into the school system because you see, going through college, I went on a state scholarship and I was required to teach for two years. So that's what I did. And so, Mrs. Kincheloe up here whose husband was Commissioner of the Revenue for many years was also on the school board. And she asked me at the end of the first year if I wouldn't work with her in his office during the summer which I did and enjoyed it. And then at the end of the next year, she said, how about coming in full time? So, I went into the commissioner's office. I worked there and then I had an offer to come down as principal of a large high school in Norfolk County. Norfolk County at that time paid the highest salaries anywhere in Virginia. So, I went down there. But I didn't

like that area of the state, so I came back to Fairfax and I taught here a while again. Then I went in the clerk's office on January 1st, 1936. There I spent thirty-two years right there.

Evans: You stayed awhile.

Chapman: Yes indeed. Retired at the end of 1967.

Evans: Let's see you were deputy.

Chapman: I was chief deputy.

Evans: Chief Deputy?

Chapman: Yes, from January 1st, [19]36 until when John Whalen died on I think July 30th of [19]45. And then I was appointed August the fourth. I was right there for the next twenty-two and a half years as clerk.

Evans: Yes. When were you with the Star? I recalled that–

Chapman: Well, I think about 19– I think it was about 1930 that I went on. I don't know whether the Star will want to claim me or not? I was there for about fifteen years. I mean just reporting locally.

Evans: As their Fairfax County?

Chapman: As their Fairfax County. And of course, it was easy in those days. I mean you didn't have as much activity to cover. And I learned a lot from it. I will say that, especially when I went into political office, I had a good background.

Evans: You covered everything?

Chapman: Everything, anything and of course being so-called straight, I wasn't subject to any guild rules. I went ahead of them there, I guess they did, but I wasn't subject to anything and they could call me at two o'clock in the morning say if it were a Saturday, see? The Post, I mean, when The Star went to bed at three o'clock, accident or anything, they'd call me about twenty-four hours a day.

Evans: What are some of the stories that stand out in your mind from that time?

Chapman: Well, that would be pretty hard to say. I don't know. I enjoyed of course writing county news and I was interested in the county naturally.

Evans: And The Star was the only paper as I recall it, that was seriously covering the county at that point.

Chapman: Well very early, but then the old Times- Herald came in and The Post started. The Post had a full-time correspondent here and of course the Times-Herald had, well, the late Senator Andrew W. Clark, he was–

Evans: Really?

Chapman: Yes, indeed. He was there.

Evans: He was your competition?

Chapman: Well, not exactly. He was more of a supervisor. And then there was Frank Ball, a lawyer now. He was with the Times-Herald and then Melvin P. Smith, another lawyer here, he was representing The Post. But we didn't have any great problems as far as competition is concerned because you didn't have as much spot news I guess as confronts the people today.

Evans: Would you go to Board of Supervisors meetings that sort of that thing?

Chapman: Well, the way I handled a lot of that, my wife substituted for me. See she could go to the meetings and she could get the highlights and then I could check the important things that I wanted and needed and so it worked out fine.

Evans: So The Star got two for the price of one?

Chapman: Actually, it did, that's what it did. And of course, your board meetings weren't as complicated then as they are today. It was more routine business. They didn't have all the zoning problems all of those things.

Evans: Right. What did they spend their time on?

Chapman: You mean the board?

Evans: Yes.

Chapman: Well, they spent it of course there were certain things that they were required to do. As far as finances are concerned, they had to direct and see that the money was properly allocated, properly spent, the tax rates were set. And those were the principle things. And of course, any ordinances naturally, they had to prepare those, advertise them, pass them, vote.

Evans: Was Mr. Loughborough in charge then?

Chapman: Oh, yes, indeed. Yes, he was.

Evans: I never quite understood what role he played.

Chapman: Well, first he was with the highway department and then he gradually came over as, well, corresponding to the County Executive, except we didn't have a County Executive then. And he was the Clerk to the Board of Supervisors, and he carried out all their orders. And then of course, when the county executive form of government came into effect why that supplanted him. Of course, he still stayed on. I mean, he was Purchasing Agent from that time on, and he did purchasing before then. In fact, he did everything except sweep the floor.

Evans: (Laughter) Probably sometimes that.

Chapman: He probably did that, yes indeed, indeed.

Evans: Who were on the Board of Supervisors in those days or who stands out in your mind as being–

Chapman: Well, of course, Pierce Reed was, Lord, I don't know how many years he was chairman.

Evans: Where was he from?

Chapman: He was from the old Mount Vernon District. His property, that was where next the Hybla Valley Airport and now it's a big development there. There's no airport there anymore. And Wallace Carper was chairman for many years. He was from old Providence District. I don't know whether you knew him or not–

Evans: Yes, he was my supervisor.

Chapman: Oh, he was?

Evans: Yes.

Chapman: Yes, indeed. And well Maurice Fox from over in the old Dranesville District. And then Mr. Buckley from Centreville District and I can't think of man from Lee District, he was old, just as witty as he could be.

Evans: First one I remember had a greenhouse.

Chapman: Arthur Shaffer. Is that the one?

Evans: Yes.

Chapman: Yes. Well Arthur Shaffer of course see Andy Clarke was on there at one time and then Herbert O. Blunt who was managing editor of the Selective Service Board in the county from its inception in 1941 until I don't know how long into the [19]50s anyway, he was managing editor, as I say, of The Gazette on the side and he was also a member of the Board of Supervisors. In fact, he followed Andy Clarke when Andy retired. Blincoe from Lee District.

Evans: There's a good name. Mr. Blincoe.

Chapman: He was a character. The Board went to Richmond, oh a number of years ago to check on automatic voting machines. And the man was explaining how it worked. And he said, if you want to vote a straight ticket, he said, you can pull this handle. And he said, if you want to vote a straight Democratic ticket, you pull his handle. Mr. Blincoe looked and said, well, the machine looks a right good thing, but he said, I don't like that Republican handle on it. (Laughter) So that's Mr. Blincoe.

Evans: Oh, that's wonderful. Where did the Board meet in those days? Then I'll let you get on to the court, which is [inaudible].

Chapman: Well no, the Board met, the board had a room right there, right in the courthouse building. That's where they held their meetings.

Evans: How often did they meet?

Chapman: They met once a month.

Evans: Oh, those were the good old days. (Laughter)

Chapman: That's right once a month, they transacted all a bit. Oh, rare occasions they might have a brief special meeting, but it wasn't common. One monthly meeting took care of everything.

Evans: And what were you doing as Chief Deputy Clerk of the Courts?

Chapman: Well, as Chief Deputy, I of course did everything and that was fortunate for me. I mean, the office was small and it was possible for me to do a little bit of everything during the day. And in that way, I got a good foundation. My predecessor had been in the clerk's office off and on most of the time since 1917. He was a lawyer himself, but he preferred to be in the clerk's office and so he knew everything thoroughly and so I had a good foundation there.

Evans: What sorts of things did you do?

Chapman: Well in the clerk's office there's so many things it's almost impossible to say. The principle, one of the principal things, of course now this is aside from the court itself. Of course, in the court, a clerk has to keep certain minutes and a record of all transactions. And then in the other part of the office, you record all instruments relating to land, all judgments, issue of marriage licenses and attorneys have to qualify, doctors have to register.

Evans: I didn't know that.

Chapman: Oh yes. After World War Two or during World War II, I guess, the General Assembly passed a law that persons coming out of the service were registered in the clerk's office, their record. And there are so many miscellaneous things that you do. And probate wills. That's the important thing a clerk has current, concurrent jurisdiction with the judges in the circuit court in handling all fiduciary matters. So, in this county, which is the busiest county in the state, the clerk's office handles 99% of, in other words, it's more convenient for an attorney to bring his client's will into the clerk's office. He can get prompt service there, but with the busy court, he would have to make an appointment with the court and bring his witnesses in at that time. So, it's a great help here, of course, in a small county, many times the judges handle it all.

Evans: How many judges did you have back in the [19]30s?

Chapman: Well, when I started one judge.

Evans: Really?

Chapman: Oh, yes. One judge. And that one judge had Prince William County, Fairfax County and Arlington County and he also went into Alexandria. At that time, of course you had a corporation court in Alexandria. And you had to have a circuit court, so there was a little bit of work in there on the circuit court side, but the corporation court handled the most of it. But the one judge had no problem. I remember first we had two months' vacation in court in the summer, it was July and August. The judge didn't– I mean, he'd come in occasionally for some important matter, some emergency matter, but we didn't have any cases on the docket. And again, that gave us a chance to catch up with a lot of things that we might be running behind and the rest of the office. So, it was quite simple.

Evans: Well you make it sound simple.

Chapman: Well, I say it's simple because if you understand it, it's like anything else. It's like being a doctor or engineer or anything else. And the person who starts in on the ground floor is better off than somebody coming in doesn't know anything in the world about it. In fact, I wouldn't go in today. I wouldn't go back.

Evans: Really?

Chapman: No indeed. Not for anything.

Evans: (Laughter) Is it just too big and complicated? Or is all the fun gone out of it?

Chapman: Well, it's big and complicated, but of course there's one thing that a lot of people don't know. A clerk in Virginia has a greater liability than any other public official. If a judge, for instance, makes a mistake, it can be appealed and the appellate court can make a change if necessary by hand in any other office. It's possible to correct mistakes. But in the clerk's office, if you, for instance, have a deed of trust, anywhere maybe from $500 to $500,000 or $5 million as they have them now for apartment projects and you don't index one, somebody doesn't index it properly and a title examiner misses it, the clerk is personally liable for that. And a judgement that's handed down in court, if it's not indexed properly or not docketed properly, the clerk is personally liable. See, there's no way you can audit those things. Your state auditors come in every year and they can audit your cash

and all of that and give you a clean bill of health, but they can't tell what you've done improperly if anything, in your records.

Evans: That's never happened here, has it?

Chapman: What is that?

Evans: Anything, any irregularity of this or any?

Chapman: Uh, no. No, I don't think it has. Of course when I was clerk, I asked all the lawyers if they saw anything in the record that they thought there was any question about to tell me about it or tell one of the deputies and I'd rather have them wrong a hundred times than I'd be wrong one time. So, I had wonderful cooperation actually. But as I say with the place so big today that it's easy to overlook something.

[Recording paused]

Evans: How many lawyers were there in the 1930s, practicing in Fairfax County?

Chapman: Well, that's right difficult to say, because of course at that time you had not only your Fairfax County attorneys, but you had those from Alexandria and Arlington who did much practicing here. As a matter of fact, they did more practicing here, I guess then our attorneys did in those two areas. And then on the other hand, our attorneys were beginning to go into Loudoun and Prince William counties. But those attorneys weren't coming here as much, but now it's spread around and it's all just one big unhappy family, I guess. But the bar was very small. I guess, I don't imagine to be more than– maybe in Arlington, Alexandra and Fairfax, I don't suppose it may be more than fifty attorneys. That's only a wild guess of course, I don't know.

Evans: Who were some of the ones out here who were most influential and very persuasive?

Chapman: Well of course R. Walter Moore and John Barber, his partner who was on the Constitutional Convention in 1903 or [190]4 I think. And Thomas R. Keith. Mr. Moore was in Congress you know for a time. Also, he was Special Assistant Secretary of State. And then the late Senator Rust. He's got a son of course, practicing here now. And then there was Wise Kelly. Of course, most of his practicing was in Washington. His son is an attorney here now and chairman of the

board of the National Nank of Fairfax. And Fred Richardson, Bob Stump, Judge Richie, and Wilson Farr, and his brother Colonel Dick Farr. Bob Stump, they were the principal ones here in Fairfax and Fairfax County. Course in Alexandria, it's the same in Arlington there were a number of them that had cases here.

Evans: Let's see you became, you were elected clerk in– or were you appointed initially?

Chapman: I was appointed by the court.

Evans: By the court?

Chapman: Yes. See I had six and a half, see it's an eight-year term. And John Whalen died about a year and a half after his term. See, its beginning of the second term.

Evans: Which was, you've told me that and I forgot.

Chapman: Well, he came in January 1st, 1936. Eight years. That would be [19]44. And then it was as I say a year and a half in 1945, I was appointed. And then six and a half years after that, I stood my first election. And then eight years after that, my next election. That was it. (Laughter) I quit.

Evans: (Laughter) That was a long time.

Chapman: It was a long time and I really enjoyed it. I mean, I don't have any regrets at all, but as I say, I still wouldn't go back today if there was a vacancy and they offered it to me.

Evans: You know too much about it.

Chapman: That's right. Yeah. Well, I mean, in a county like this, you've got to have younger people. You can't have older ones handling important things like that. You'll see in the school system, younger teachers, younger superintendents.

Evans: Yes, yes. Tell me about your term of office when you became Clerk of the Courts. About how big was the system then? How many judges were there then?

Chapman: One. You mean when I became clerk?

Evans: Yes.

Chapman: There was one judge.

Evans: Still one.

Chapman: Still one judge. And then shortly after they added another one. The General Assembly added another one. They kept on adding them. I think there were eight circuit court judges when I retired and then we had about the same number of county court judges. You don't call them county court now, it's a regional court, but we had, I think about six of those and then two juvenile and domestic relations court judges. And under a special act of the General Assembly, I not only was Clerk of the Circuit Court, but I was also Clerk of the old County Court and Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court. So, I had it all in one office. And at that time it was very efficient. I mean, the office wasn't so large that you couldn't have the two staffs right together. And of course, you had your– because many people calling into one office would get the wrong one. Well if they were all together, why there was no problem there. Then lots of times people would come into one and they weren't certain where they should be. But I think well within the last year they've changed it back again. It got too complicated or something. So now they have a separate clerk there, but he's appointed and not elected.

Evans: And during the– well, that period, you know, from when you took over, which was almost the end of World War Two up through the [19]50s, tell me about some of the changes that happened in the court system. And in the county government in general. As you look back on it now, what are the most interesting, significant changes?

Chapman: Well, as far as the system is concerned, the changes there were more evolutionary. I mean, as you went on and you added more judges as you needed them, and of course your cases became more complicated in a sense.

Evans: I was wondering about that.

Chapman: Yes, you had more automobile accidents and so they increased in number and they increased very fast and I believe they are still doing the same.

Evans: Probably.

Chapman: Probably, yes, I think so. I mean, for a number of years there, even before this became the largest county in the state, I mean in business, our court business was larger than any other place. Of course, we had only one court and say the City of Richmond had about six different courts, but they didn't have any greater population than we did and finally our population has almost, well has doubled. And so have our judges. But actually, the changes were so gradual that you didn't recognize them.

Evans: Do you find people coming to court for different reasons or was it just an increase?

Chapman: Well, now, now there, there was a difference there. Of course, in the old days, when I say the old days I mean, say prior to the [19]30s for instance, and after the [19]30s too for a short time, many, many private citizens came into the clerk's office to transact their business. I mean, to record their deeds and their trusts and to get information about this, that, and the other thing. Many years ago, they called the clerk the poor man's lawyer because everybody, all the farmers came in and other people too, to ask questions and of course it's different now. All of those things mostly are handled by attorneys. People have their attorney prepare their deed, and examines the title to the property, and then he records the deed and the trust, so you don't have the public coming in as much, except of course, as jurors and as witnesses. That's the main difference.

Evans: That's interesting.

Chapman: It is. Yeah, it is. And I saw that transition. Course as I say at first, you would see more of your friends coming in, you know, for business, but gradually they stopped and attorneys started taking over. It's a natural thing. The business is so complicated today that a person has got to have legal knowledge for much of these business transactions.

Evans: Even for recording a deed I suppose, you have to be. That's a pretty crucial kind of thing.

Chapman: Well, it certainly can be. Yes, indeed. Because when you come in say at 10 o'clock to record a deed, if somebody came in at fifteen minutes before 10 and docketed a judgement that affects that property and you didn't check it, that judgment that holds priority. So, you are in trouble right there. But your attorney, when he comes in, he checks the records right up to the minute that the instrument goes on. That protects the purchaser of the property. Now of course, it wouldn't be

happening very many times that somebody would come in ten or fifteen minutes before, but it has happened and it can happen anytime.

Evans: Then the clerk's office has to be pretty precise then–

Chapman: Well, those things are all timed. I mean, when somebody comes into docket a judgment, why we put the date and the time. They're all, that's put on there by a machine now. I mean, we stamp it. And the same thing with the deed. So, there can't be any question about it. Your machine, of course is going on all the time. If your judgement is one time, and the deed is ten minutes afterwards, that's it.

Evans: Tell me about the most interesting and most influential of the lawyers during that period, say after World War II. Who were the ones who really had an impact here?

Chapman: Well course after World War II that would be almost an impossible thing because many of them, or a number of them were specializing in real estate. Some in fiduciary matters. Some in strictly trial matters. So, the law again was taking on, well sort of a departmental system. There are a number of lawyers here who specialized entirely in real estate transactions. And then there's, as I say, as the automobile cases, damage suits increased, then a number of lawyers specialized strictly in the court work. And now they're going back to a system where they have lawyers in the office, they're large law firms and they can handle everything. That's the way it works.

Evans: It seemed to me lawyers were extremely influential. I moved here, well originally in 1942, but really came out here to sort of stay in [19]45 when we bought a house out here. I remember Andrew Clarke as being one who carried a great deal of–

Chapman: Oh yes, they did and they still do, but I don't think they're quite as much interested in those things today probably as they were then. There's a little difference. I mean, the lawyers are decenter today, but their offices weren't. So of course, a few of them in the General Assembly, for instance, and some aspire to be judges and they do become judges, but many of them are content to just handle their business and that's it.

Evans: It's probably more lucrative. (Laughter)

Chapman: Oh, no doubt about that. That's right.

Evans: So, I guess Andrew Clarke was a billionaire

Chapman: Oh, yes, Andy was a millionaire, no question about it. A lawyer died in Falls Church. It was very shocking. He died a number of years and he was a millionaire.

Evans: Really?

Chapman: Yeah. Course millionaire back in those days was a bit more than a million dollars today, I guess. (Laughter) I don't have a million, but I bet you hear more about millions today than you heard about then.

Evans: Tell me a little bit about the courthouse building, how it grew. I know you had a lot to do with that.

Chapman: Well, of course originally, we had– well when I say originally, I mean in more modern times after the turn of the century, we had the courthouse on the north, which is the north end of the complex now. That is right across from the National Bank of Fairfax.

Evans: By the cannon.

Chapman: Yes, by the cannon. That's correct. And then right in front of it, sort of a little bit south, just a few feet south was the old clerk's office brick building that corresponded very, to the present old court wing. And then little later they tore that down and they built a brick building. Just a square, very crude building in the back and they had the clerk's office on the first floor and the Commissioner of the Revenue and the Treasurer on the second floor. And of course, the Commonwealth's Attorney always had his own office. He just– it was a part time job. And so he didn't have any office in the county, in the county complex I mean. So those were the principle officers of the county.

Evans: I'm going to stop for a minute.

[Recording paused]

Chapman: Yes. Then in the late [19]20s, they put the first addition on to the north wing and then I think it was [19]51 or [19]52, I believe [19]51 they put the next addition on.

Evans: You say they, but you had a lot to do with it, didn't you?

Chapman: Well not too much. The only thing that I had anything to do with was the arrangement of the clerk's office portion. Each time but that was my principle responsibility. The clerk's office was the first one to move into the last addition they put. I don't mean after the Massey Building, I mean in the 1951 period. And for a time, we had enough room. Of course, the Clerk's Office before that was cluttered. We had deed books and other record books just standing on the floor. There wasn't any room for storing them properly. Of course, when we got in there for several years, it was wonderful we had all the room in the world. And then all of a sudden, the business started booming and we found ourselves almost in worst condition than we were in the former place. I've got statistics here which are very interesting. Course in writing for the paper I kept certain monthly statistics from 1935 January 1st on, the number of instruments recorded each month. And course the total end for the year. I also kept the total of building permits issued from the county, in the county from the inception of that ordinance that required building permits. And I also kept a copy of the number of marriage licenses that were issued each month. They were three pertinent things I mean reflecting the growth of the county and it's very interesting. I was appointed on August 4th. August was the beginning of the growth in this county. You had your numbers going very steadily through July and then August jumped sharply.

Evans: Was that V-E Day by any chance?

Chapman: Well, it happened right afterwards because you see that's what happened the soldiers were coming back and houses were starting to sell more and more building and more of them getting married. But as I say those records show, that reflect from that month on.

Evans: You do have those, in case anyone should want to borrow them? Let's look at these and just talk about them.

Chapman: Alright.

Evans: You want to just sit down and tell me a bit about them?

Chapman: Well. There isn't much to tell you as I say they are strictly statistics.

Evans: They just go up?

Chapman: And as I say by the month.

Evans: How many–

Chapman: There were 3,190 instruments recorded in 1935. In 1942, there 5,794.

Evans: Almost double.

Chapman: And let me see. Somebody's been looking at these, it's a little bit out of order.

Evans: We have plenty of time.

Chapman: In 1944, there were 5,474. Then in 1945, 6,933. But listen to this, in 19[46], 12,647.

Evans: In one year it doubled.

Chapman: Yeah. And [19]48 was 14,983 and [19]49 dropped a little bit. 14,015. But [19]50, 21,000. So that's the way we went.

Evans: Straight up.

Chapman: Straight up is right. And then of course, the same is true with building permits and marriage licenses. Exactly.

Evans: They all followed each other?

Chapman: They all followed each other, that's correct.

Evans: Tell me about the Washington's wills.

Chapman: Well, since you mentioned that, you mentioned some of the highlights in the county. This picture right down here where you see the police officers?

Evans: Yes.

Chapman: Well in the early [19]50s, the British Bar had a meeting in Washington and on one Saturday afternoon, Mount Vernon was closed to the public and the members of the bar and their families were invited out there to a reception. And they asked if the two Washington wills could be brought there. And of course, only the circuit court could permit that. And the judge entered an order directing me to take them down there for two hours that afternoon to be on public exhibit.

Evans: Good Lord, what a hazardous thing though.

Chapman: Well, they were very– as you see there we had five police officers. They were carried in a police van.

Evans: And you standing over them?

Chapman: And I was in the van too and there were police cars in front and back because of course they are two of the most valuable documents in the country, I guess. So, as I say this was the first time legally they were ever moved from the courthouse. Now illegally they left there, but not legally.

Evans: Really?

Chapman: Yeah. You see the will of Martha Washington was stolen during the Civil War and early in this century they discovered that it was in the possession of a very wealthy millionaire in the country and as a collector's item. So, the state asked him to return it on the ground that it was stolen property. It had to be stolen because it couldn't be out of– it's a public record. And so, he refused. And then the Commonwealth of the Virginia filed suit in the United States Supreme Court demanding the return on the ground that it was stolen property. Well as soon as the suit was filed, why the will was returned to the state.

Evans: Quietly, no doubt?

Chapman: Very quietly, yes. So, the suit was dismissed right there. And of course, Washington's will was carried to Richmond. Not illegally, I mean they were trying to protect it. It was protected because they got it back at the end of the war. But this is the only time they legally they ever left the clerk's office.

[Recording paused]

[Evans and Chapman are looking at photographs in his home]

Evans: We can just walk around and I'll hold the mike and you tell me what you have here. First one.

Chapman: Well, there's looking east from the courthouse towards Alexandria, you know?

Evans: When?

Chapman: In about 1903. And of course, that is the old hotel that stood where the National Bank of Fairfax is. I don't know whether you know it or not, but you probably do, that was dismantled brick by brick when the bank was built and carried down where Flint Hill School is and Mr. Miller.

Evans: Frances Pickens Miller.

Chapman: Frances Pickens Miller rebuilt it there and occupied it as his residence. Well when they moved from Fairfax County, they sold it to Flint Hill School and so actually the brick in that, or the brick I should say in Flint Hill School is from there.

Evans: Do you know what year that was taken? Can you tell by the cars? (Laughter)

Chapman: No. I can't tell by the cars, but it was in the [19]20s. It was in the early [19]20s.

Evans: And that was where the streetcar–

Chapman: Where the National Bank of Fairfax stands. Exactly.

Evans: And where you use to get the streetcar?

Chapman: Yes, right in front of it. That's correct cause you could sit on the porch there and wait for the car.

Evans: Very handy.

Chapman: Yeah. And of course, the other two that's John Whalen and me and Sterling Swart who was another deputy. Now those are right there are copies of two Bradys taken during the Civil War. And those are Union troops–

Evans: I've seen this one.

Chapman: You've probably seen both.

Evans: Not that one. Is that a gazebo? Is that what you call it? The little building.

Chapman: Yes, well that was a well.

Evans: That's a well?

Chapman: Yes. A number of people in town got water from that well. It was a deep well and–

Evans: Any idea how long that was there?

Chapman: That well?

Evans: Yes.

Chapman: No, I don't have any idea, but I'm sure it must've been there probably all the time the courthouse was there because– see when the courthouse came here in 1799, yes they started building it in 1799, and they first used it in 1801, I think. So, the well I'm sure must've been there. Course they probably didn't have that gazebo.

Evans: It's very attractive.

Chapman: Yes, it is and as I say it was extremely useful. And of course, that's one of the governors of Virginia and my wife, they had a party here somewhere in Fairfax and she's pinning a–

Evans: Who's that? The governor.

Chapman: That's Governor Stanley.

Evans: Governor Stanley?

Chapman: Yep.

Evans: He was in 1940, late 1940s.

Chapman: I think that's right. And then of course I had the distinction of writing the largest check in Fairfax County.

Evans: To buy the Alexandria Water Company?

Chapman: The water company, yeah. Right there I'm swearing in Supreme Court Justice Harry Carrico when he was–

Evans: What's this plaque?

Chapman: Well they're both in connection with the clerkship. Well this one over here on the right, the Alexandria Bar gave me when I retired. And this one over here, I was president of the National Association of Recorders and Clerks. So that was one I got from there.

Evans: And this fascinates me. Tell me about this picture here.

Chapman: That one up there?

Evans: Yes.

Chapman: You would be surprised what that is. That's a picture of the Office of the Quartermaster General of the Army in the [18]90s. My father there over on the left.

Evans: A handsome man.

Chapman: And Major Wheaton over on the right. There were two of them in there. But isn't that a far cry from the penny gun?

Evans: It surely is. (Laughter)

Chapman: I tell you that was.

Evans: Now let's come on over here. Or you can see them anyway.

Chapman: And of course, this is just a party, regular annual party of the Arlington Bar in 1947. And course I'm in there. And course this is the late George Brown and the late Billy Wills(?) who was judge of the Corporation Court in Alexandria. And Judge McCarthy who is still living in Arlington County. You know that?

Evans: (Laughter) I don't know what he's saying about you there, but it is Senator Byrd Sr.

Chapman: Yes, it is, that's right.

Evans: Did he come out here much? Did he have any involvements in Fairfax County?

Chapman: You know, he did not.

Evans: Yeah, I wondered about that.

Chapman: People talk about the Byrd Machine and everything. Well the Byrd Machine was something that was in the imagination. I don't mean it didn't exist, but I mean it was merely many people believing the same thing but not having any organization. That's the difference. I mean you and I might agree on something, but we don't have any organization. And it just happens that we do and a lot of others may agree with us, so they called that the machine. But it wasn't anything like Pendergast Machine or Tammany Hall.

Evans: You didn't have anything to dispense?

Chapman: Nothing to dispense. While all the years I was clerk, nobody told me about employing anybody in the office or asking me not to employ anybody. And of course, I was a support of Senator Byrd and his policies, but as I say, there never was any, any even hint of anything. And of course, that's what hurt the press so bad, they never could find anything.

Evans: And they never could understand about the difference–

Chapman: They couldn't understand it. No, they couldn't understand that it was possible for people in the state tot have a common interest. That was it. But it was all, it was just all a figment of the imagination. I mean to say that there was a machine.

Evans: They're still were powerful men who–

Chapman: Oh, yes indeed.

Evans: Kept things moving.

Chapman: That's right they were powerful. You bet they were, especially in Richmond and all. And they could do a lot of help for a person in an emergency. But as I say, as far as dictating, there was no such thing. Sometimes I wondered maybe if I was clerkly. Probably did. That's an original deed signed by Thomas the Sixth Lord Fairfax after whom the county was named. You know a man walked in the office one day and sitting there talking to me and pulled that thing out of his pocket all folded up and he said, did you ever see anything like this? Said it had been in the family I don't know how long he said, how many generations. And I said you shouldn't be carrying that thing folded up like that. I said the paper is beginning to rot, you can see that. Well, he said, do you want it? Well I practically jumped over my desk and grabbed it fearing he was making a mistake giving it to me.

Evans: Do you have any idea where the land is? Can you tell?

Chapman: No, I've never attempted to. I mean it's somewhere not right around this area.

[End of transcription]

Transcribed by Chris Barbuschak, June 2020